The Sacred World of The Maya

Costumbre and Religión in Guatemala

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Dedicated to my friend and former student, Edwin C. Buxbaum.

Nothing is more real than the real; and that is why it is well for men to hurt themselves with the past—it is one road to tolerance. (L. Eiseley 1971:85)

In the 15th century adventurous Iberian men crossed an unknown ocean, guided only by the faith that there was a destiny to be found. After years of exploring island and mainland beaches, the Iberians went inland. By 1524 they were in the central highlands of Goathemala among socially and politically well-organized Maya people. Soon all Mayan-speaking people became subject to the Spanish king.

Iberians and Native Americans had well established ways, and although some aspects of their cultures could be shared, each group possessed other truths, which endured the turmoil of the conquest. With our knowledge of European history, we view the rich ceremonialism of today in Guatemala as either pagan or as Christian. Rituals presided over by Maya knowledgeable men in mountains, forest, homes, and churches are known as costumbre (Fig. 1). A procession or mass led by a Catholic priest is religión (Fig. 2). Today these are important cultural markers of the two groups.

Mayan and Christian beliefs have remained in opposite camps, frequently overpowering each other. In

1 Ritual of costumbre carried out on behalf of an individual. The man performing the rite is an expert, whose rituals are considered highly effective. He offers copal (incense), flower petals, and candles on behalf of his client, who stands behind him in the town market place. His requests to the forces of nature are made in the Mayan language. (1967)
people should make a living. The origin of each settlement, celebrated in myths, is not only unique but sacred. Succeeding generations have been emotionally attached to those resources, feeling that the place and the roots must be respected. Conformity and habit will not destroy society, they know, and these thoughts they communicate to each other with sounds of languages from long ago and in costumbres rituals.

With the creation of new settlements after the conquest, a central building was constructed in the European style (Fig. 3) to serve the sacred world of the Europoques the iglesia, or church. In some pueblos it occupies a site once set aside for Mayan offerings. To the church Naturaless come, and with dark feelings, to invoke assistance from humans frozen in European statues. Non-Indians, Ladinos, come too but their ways and minds are different, their life style has another cultural root. They are in religion.

There is for Maya people a separation between the real and the invisible world that they need to bridge with acts of faith to ameliorate the fear of their mortality. Unlike Ladinos or Spanish who accepted institutional answers to the question of man's existence, Mayas described their human wanderings with distinctive sounds and unique style.

These sounds of long ago continue to make these people true Maya.

Churches or selected places in nature designated for their inexplicable but intrinsic qualities, Maya people visit regularly, to spend time alone or in the company of a traditional Maya specialist. Acting properly, these places may lengthen people's lives, usually in proportion to what they bring in exchange: the invaluable of the mind. This it is mending of time and space, these 'special moments,' which are both invented by the ancestors and replicated again and again by the traditional people of today. In the Mayan world there are hundreds if not thousands of such moments. Native thinkers understand them as acts of costumbres, equal to all other cultural categories of their social life.

In the Western world, however, there are the sacred and the secular spheres. Western men therefore compartmentalize the world and see the Mayan costumbres as belonging in the sphere of religion. With this orientation a large repertoire of costumbres has been documented under a universal category of religion: the religion of the Mayas. But their world is sacred, and it is necessary to strip ourselves of certain conventional ways of thinking about religion to understand those acts.

I would like to depart from the Western point of view and briefly enter into two distinctive moments referred to by Maya people as co...

4 Village men walk out from the shores of a lake to perform costumbre. Moving carefully so as not to disturb the surface of the lake, they place poles with flowers and scatter petals on the water. The rite is carried out at the end of the dry season in order to call the rains.

(1959)
costumbre and religion. Because I have witnessed them a number of times, and happen to be reasonably familiar with these behaviors, I choose to write about these acts because they disclose for us much of the universe as experienced by Maya men and women. Emotions are involved in each act but they are different and separate in nature.

Thirty years ago I witnessed for the first time costumbre. Humans entered a room, their faces expressionless, and stood motionless before an altar with Catholic symbols. Each one "spoke" to the altar; it was not a Christian prayer. As are many other aspects of life, this moment was another daily task.

An old Maya gentleman responding to one of my questions said in almost poetic phrases:

"Oh...some of us are praying to the saints, others are speaking to the saints.
Some are with costumbre in the delicate mountains with strong belief in the ways of our ancestors.
Some are in churches with religion."

This might have been a casual remark on his part but it opened up a world unknown to me. He was introducing a basic distinction between two components of their life: costumbre and religion. They were in this case not so much two aspects of life in opposition but two stages in the same road of life. The problem was then to understand each one in its own right as well as the interconnection between the two, because Western religion, for many occasions, has become costumbre. Costumbre and religion constitute systems of knowledge which in general serve to nurture those crea-

5 Within the rainforest of Guatemala's Pacific coast, a young man performs a solitary ritual of costumbre in front of an archaeological monument. He is burning incense and making an offering of candles and tortillas while making his own request to the spirits for the recovery of a sick child. (1968)

6 Costumbre may be for the benefit of the entire community. Here members of a brotherhood of cofradías carry their mail on a visit to the church. As in all rituals of costumbre, there are no spectators, only participants. The women of the cofradía carry flowers, while the men carry a Mayan drum and the salt. (1967)

7 Within the village of Chimaltenango, apostoles carry out an annual ceremony for the good of the community. On the Thursday before Easter, the 15 apostles dress with the aid of their helpers. The office of Apostle is held for a period of one year and is occupied by every respected adult male within the village at some time in his life. (1967)

8 Apostle of Chimaltenango standing in deep concentration, ready to begin the 24-hour ritual. Each man who has held the office of Apostle is buried in his elaborate costume. (1967)
In some of the dictionaries prepared by a monastic man of the 18th century, _costumbre_ was defined from the point of view of the natives. "A cos- tumbre se hace siempre...el tiempo de costum- bre..." meaning, "so it is always done. he has it as costumbre."

In acts of _costumbr_ people found additional benefits as they met their human obligations: they could expect to become elders with many children, to be free from illness, and to expect an abundant harvest of maize. Today as in the past, Maya people with hungry spirits and with the burden of an inner voice, respond with acts of _costumbr_ and with "a mind which needed only the stimulus of knowledge to reach across the expanse of the past or hurt itself upon the future" (Eiseley 1971: 220).

In much concentration of thought these Maya beings come to encounter Time in an old discarded stone face left by ancestors who passed through with thoughts "of al- ways." A Maya man has not lost the ability to communicate across generations with those others who are traveling along the way in the space of time.

In Figure 5 a man is seeking harmony between himself and the non-human sphere. By offering copal, incense, candles, and his own food, he hopes to open the road to harmony. Forgiveness, he asks, permission to take energy from the soil before planting his maize. Speaking in his Mayan language to the essence of Time in space through the reality of a figure carved on a stone, he empties his burdened mind to begin anew; he knows that Time found the place, consecrated it, and left for future generations to show their respect and obedience by acts of individual _costumbr_. In this surrounding, this humble man achieves a victory, declaring "there is hope that my children will not continue to be ill; that I will have a good crop of maize so my family will have food next year." _Costumbr_ is an obligation.

He spends a few hours alone in silence hosting the banquet he is offering to the Earth. He knows that the day in the Mayan calendar is appropriate, a knowledgeable old gentleman had made the calculations for him. Then, without destroying, removing or disturbing the elements of nature, separated from him, he returns to his own human world. His visit symbolizes regeneration of that energy used by humans and the continuity of Nature. Maya man's mind is integral with nature and moves under nature's laws, not the laws of Man.

This is what the act of _costumbr_ by a lonely Maya man means to the presence of all those things which are of nature, therefore Natural, and the absence of legal and religious laws. Nature belongs to the other people like him and, he hopes, a portion belongs to him.

His voice and those of thousands of other individuals with the same Mayan roots, separated from each other by mountains and valleys, form an imperceptible chorus carrying the same creative message against the hazards of existing on this planet. Together, they know, they are returning energy to the earth.

Many life events in the mountains are closed to people of Guatemala's cities. Ladinos will say these events are _costumbr_, cons of the Naturales, things of the Naturales. In the life and history of Mayan communities they were and are distinctive moments. No clergy are invited for the organization or implementation of _costumbr_. Priests were there organizing rituals in the early history of the community, but they gradually left for other places, leaving the Naturales alone remembering only some aspects of their past.

In one community after the departure of the priests the Apostles of the Bible became the Apostles of Santa Cruz Chiamul, and thus an act of European religion became an act of...
11. The archbishop of Guatemala leads the procession down the path of the pagas. The man in white behind him directs the movement of about 30 men who carry the platform, making sure that they move in unison. Because the mahogony platform on which the figure of Christ stands is so heavy, the teams of bicaras is changed frequently along the route. (1965)

12. Both costume and religion are celebrated at a wedding after the church ceremony is performed by a priest, the ceremony takes place on the second day at home. The men in traditional dress are giving her blessings and advice to the bride and groom. (1965)

13. There was another differentiation. The attendants had on the everyday large straw hats, which the apostles had wrapped on their heads, but the vases were made of multiple bright colors. They were expected to receive them, but this was expected; only their wives with their own attendants used the clay vessels containing food. It was evident that many more people had participated in the preparation of the food in the entire community. This was an act of community costume. Four days before this day there had been visits and gatherings of principal pago; elders, to appoint or elect the three men to represent the gentlemen to become "Apostoles de Chiquinua." Careful evaluation of each one was important because they were to perform something special from the past in the present and in the eyes of the approximately forty hundred people born in this special place. The act was something special between the group and those Things of Nature which support them. Other towns had their own ways to celebrate, on days assigned to them. This was one of Chiquinua's days that secured them to their existence. Whatever happened, these "apostoles" could not fail.

Forty days of preparation of the mind were symbolized by the bailing ceremony of the night before. The sun was much care in each step for this act of costume, which was once a ritual of the church, of religion. The sun was rising at the gathering took place. Strangely enough there were no sounds from the drum or flute (chirimia). Silence was the state of things, interrupted only by the crowing of roosters and the howling of hungry dogs, or the crying of an infant.

The twelve helpers extended the straw mats on the ground while the apostles, lined up in pairs facing the church, remained silent, patiently waiting for the next step. There was concentration and each one appeared struggling to capture and enter into a special state of mind. Long hours of repetitious behavior were ahead of them. The roles brought fear; the fear of failing due to fatigue. Failing would mean danger for the people of this community.

Along with the nervousness of those moments was deep faith in the replication of this act more in their lifetime; if properly carried out there would be another year. Time could be borrowed.

Holy Mass brought two stones and placed them at the edge of the road, one to sit on and the other for their feet. Other helpers received from the women at the edge a pottery vessel containing water perfumed with orange blossoms. The water was used by the helpers to wash the apostles' feet. In the next step, while they sat on the mats, they were served the early meal of the day, and their last for twenty-four hours. They received a cup of hot chocolate, tortillas, and special food prepared of fish and other seafood brought from the tropical Pacific Coast. The ranching order became important in this silent performance. The First Apostle knelt, then his partner, the Second Apostle; they faced each other. The rest proceeded to line themselves up in like manner. The First then pronounced a few words in his Mayan language, it was like a prayer; in a very low voice he stated the purpose of the Agonazo. He made the sign of the cross not once but several times. The most respected of all the elders appeared on the high ground of the church steps, came down, and stopped in front of each apostle to give his approval with the sign of the cross over them. The moment was dramatic. They thanked each other with great reverence as they placed their hands across their chests in a prayerful manner.

The next act was the ceremonial dressing with the clothing brought in the carefully wrapped bundles. The assistants opened them and assisted each apostle (Fig. 7). The four pieces consisted of a long white gown decorated with silver, green, purple, and gold paper stripes pasted over the white cotton material, a triangular cape of the same decorative pattern worn over the white gown, a purple band tied around the waist, and a embroidered cap of the same material and motifs. They are people of another time and as Apostles of Chiquinua they are of Pokomam ancestry, and in their understanding they display their Mayan roots.

Very careful preparation and adjustment of each piece of clothing was observed. The half hour seemed to move slowly as people waited with concern and anticipation for the next stage of the activities. With the passing of time, the moment was delicate, as an elderly woman stated.

When the robing had been completed, (Fig. 8), trumpeters with the church sacristans came forward from the church to meet them. The first two apostles turned toward the center of the mats and moved forward on their knees followed by the other apostles (Fig. 9). When they were in two single lines in front of the cross, they made the sign of the cross and then they lay down on the ground, kissing it, in the center, and requesting in this manner permission to enter the church.

The helpers maintained a dignified silence, which contributed to the solemnity. The apostles stood up and walked on the mats, which were moved from back to front by the assistants. As they walked toward the church with direct and fixed expression, concentration was increasing with each step. They seemed to be in possession of whatever was needed to properly perform this act of costume for the people. The task bestowed on them was difficult; the body and mind must truly be united.

In the center aisle and parallel to it had been placed two long wooden benches facing each other, near the altar, in the floor, was a black pillow of velvet upon which lay a cross covered with a black cloth. All saints, including "El Nino de Chiquinua," the patron saint, were under black veils. With the sounds of drums, trumpets, and flutes, and in the heavy smoke of incense and six-pound candles, the apostles knelt. The First and Second apostles in line came forward on their knees to the pillow. There they made the sign of the cross, lowered themselves to their elbows, and lay flat at the side of the pillow. They kissed the pillow, then the earthy lifted themselves up to their knees; made the sign of the cross; placed their hands together at
chest level; faced each other while bowing their heads; moved backward; arose to sit rigidly on the benches and remained there, reverent and stoic figures.

The next two apóstoles proceeded in the same manner, followed by the others. This ceremonial behavior was repeated continuously through the day and night. The hierarchical rank of the apostles was never disturbed. Next day, with painful knees, they were guided by the trumpeters and drummers to their respective homes after a visit in the First Apostle's home. People in their homes knew that things had gone well and the amount of security for their existence had increased. "Se cumpliera, ex obligations," stated a person of the pueblo in satisfaction; the pueblo had fulfilled an obligation. Nothing of the earth had been regenerated, the community would receive the rains soon and maize would grow.

As with many other performances of the costumbres there were no explanations, no speeches, only actions; each movement brought a message. Costumbre in this community spoke of continuity of a code of correct behavior and thought; costumbre brought order and strength.

There is more.

A man of costumbre does not control the process of change. He is not to undertake to make a future different from the one that he has inherited from the past. The apostles, as well as the lonely man in the forest visiting the stome carving, are ready to continue their existence with those elements of nature that have been made available to them by the Creator Spirit. The challenge is to recreate the future as the immediate past. In costumbre they know how to feel and how to relate to each other and to all elements in nature needed for the continuity of life (Reina 1966).

Christianity was forced on the Maya in the early days of the Conquest; left alone and to their own resources, this people transformed Catholic rituals for Easter in an act of costumbre with the meaning of those Mayan rituals performed before the Europeans came. It was a time of much concern because the dry season had been long and the rains should have come but "would they come as usual" was an ever present question.

In 1976 the earthquake destroyed the church but not the place of costumbre. With the same thoughts and in the usual way the designated apostles performed the act of costumbre.

Not very far from the pueblo with its apostles, people engage in an elaborate public celebration which lasts for one week. It takes place during the same days as the acts of costumbres by the Apostles of Chinalua; it is Easter in Antigua, the colonial capital.

In contrast with the pueblo streets, those in Antigua are filled with hundreds of people who, of their own will, participate in the Easter pageant and, as an act of faith, take different roles. Men dressed as Roman soldiers guard the streets, while "Palestinian," as people of Christ's homeland, walk in the streets accompanying processions and carrying saints. In contrast again with the small pueblo, they are
guided by Catholic priests while band plays funeral music, all in an effort to portray the historical last days of Christ on this earth. Vendors follow the events feeding the thousands of people who witness the performance. It is a good time for profitable business by small entrepreneurs. The streets of the colonial city become the stage for a performance on Christianity and on being a Christian. People know its significance in history and the theological meaning. It is history brought to the present and all churches of the city participate in the event.

The past is in the present. The institution of the church has led in the preparation; the people of the town, both Naturales and Ladinos, play a role in these church ceremonial events. The language used is Spanish.

"It may be costumbre perhaps," explained a traditional Maya man, "but it is not the same."

"Why?" I asked.

"Who knows, señor," he slowly and reflectively responded. "It's a religion. You see the priests are there."

No church bells toll on this occasion. Bells do not have a place at this time; these are hours for silent meditation and for sadness. The townpeople are expected to show the mood of the day even when projecting their social standing. By their roles, their position in the political power structure of the city is displayed.

Christ is in trouble. The Roman soldiers on horseback, accompanying Pontius Pilate in a chariot drawn by two horses, publicly announce at each street corner his coming death by crucifixion on Friday.

Thursday afternoon at sundown people center their activities on the streets in front of their homes. The streets are carefully swept by men, some Ladinos, other Naturales, of this and nearby towns. Together they offer the best of their abilities for the suffering Christ when he will be taken by the priests into the streets for his last walk, holding the heavy cross on his shoulders and followed by the Virgin, his mother (see Fig. 12), and St. Joseph, as well as all other saints who were part of this historical event in another land.

The streets begin to change in appearance. People work steadily from sunset on Thursday to sunup on Holy Friday (Fig. 10). When all activities have ended, the streets of the old city have a beauty of rare quality. Sawdust, like sand painting, is laid out in designs with brilliant colors to mark the path for Christ.

The beauty that has been achieved overnight has a short life, however. Only a few short moments are left to walk along beside the "rope" to admire several miles of such spectacular presentation of colors and design. There are no guards in the streets, but no one disturbs this presentation; it is sacred and for the passage of Christ.

The population dressed in costumes from another place in time and history flanks the ropes (see cover). The Archbishop of Guatemala leads, as the procession follows the heavy platform carried on the shoulders of fifty men. On the platform, the Christ with the Cross slowly glides along over the polished rugs (Fig. 11). Facing the procession there is much beauty in the colors and motifs; that Christ could be helped in
these moments of suffering is the thought of those who prepare the streets. But after the passing of those bearing this platform the destruction is dramatic, as all motifs vanish (Fig. 12). He alone has the power to destroy as the hour of his crucifixion nears.

People stop to reflect; a moment ago beauty suddenly turned into dust. Crisis is at the roots of religión as symbolized by the physical destruction of man's worldly things. The old gentleman I quoted earlier said, "Who knows, who knows...," as he contemplated the destruction and tried to process the event through his still-strong Mayan understanding. There was crisis reflected in this portrayal, and seen from his position as a Maya man, it would seem that those participating were asking for destruction by replicating it.

Sixteenth-century Christianity brought new symbols to replace those created by Naturales from this land. Acceptance has separated those who were of the land, the Naturales, and those who came from across the sea. Ethnic identity has been maintained by acts of religión and of costumbre, as each group maintains their own cultural boundaries. Costumbre speaks to the Maya people for the continuity of a code of correct behavior; it brings peaceful order and integration with nature. It brings strength to the Mayan culture of today.

There is a Natural way, the first one; costumbre bespeaks the Mayas' intimate thoughts. The Ladino way is that of religión, meaning to be in and of the civilized world. The philosophical underpinnings that support the basic socio-political orientations of national culture (Ladino) and the community culture (Mayan) are in religión and costumbre.

"Ethnic identity has been maintained by acts of religión and of costumbre, as each group maintains their own cultural boundaries."

"Who knows, who knows" were the words of the old gentleman as he observed a past in the sawdust left scattered over the streets, reminding him of man's bad nature. What he knows is that costumbre constitutes a way of his community; while religión is highly structured, costumbre is a way of life (Fig. 13).

His thoughts recall words in the native Chilam Balam book of Yucatan. The Maya author wrote: "Before, it was written, everything was good...there was no sin...there was then no sickness...the course of humanity was orderly...The foreigners made it otherwise when they arrived here. Then with the true God came the beginning of our misery."

There is no god or salvation in costumbre; all unique elements in nature are "gods," sacred. Costumbre is there to insure the renewal of life in everything (Fig. 15). The clear demarcation between Man and God in religión does not exist under costumbre. The death and resurrection of a man named Christ is a miracle in religión; costumbre has no miracle.

Social philosophers and scientists would argue perhaps that both costumbre and religión are religion in our Western sense; this may be seen as a problem of definition. From the Naturales' viewpoint this intellectual level is not and perhaps will never be part of Mayan cognitive structure. Costumbre and religión respond to the nature of societies and their histories; each mobilizes a different cultural program. While rituals of costumbre comply with myths, legends, and informal beliefs (creencias), rituals of religión dictate dogmas to the believers and present beliefs as compartmentalized aspects of the whole.

And so nowadays people of this land have a choice either to be part of established costumbre or religión, or they may be part of both as they become conscious of their own mortality. But to pass totally from one to the other implies the change of oneself to Ladino clothing and thoughts. This requires forgetting those ways of the Naturales, their language and costumbre, and learning a new philosophy base on principles held by the people of European descent.

The decision remains difficult; it is whether to enter a world where men destroy "rugs"...

Maya elders are still wishing that religión would change into costumbre, so the Mayan ways will continue, but "who knows"!

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